DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 281 226 CS 210 453

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TITLE Secondary Writing Centers: Benefits of College and Secondary Collaboration.
PUB DATE Mar 87
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (38th, Atlanta, GA, March 19-21, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College School Cooperation; Cooperative Programs; *Experiential Learning; Higher Education; Peer Teaching; Preservice Teacher Education; Secondary Education; Staff Utilization; *Teaching Experience; *Tutoring; *Writing Improvement; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Laboratories

ABSTRACT

Based on college writing center models, a number of high schools are deciding to establish writing centers, some of them in anticipation of competency tests in composition. Staffing can be the single most significant and expensive factor for secondary schools wanting to provide writing centers. Among the options for dealing with the staffing problem are: (1) using peer tutors, who can be very effective if trained carefully to serve as approachable reader-responders; (2) scheduling student teachers to spend one period a day in the writing center, affording valuable experience and leaving full-time teachers free for their regular duties; and (3) persuading administrators to reduce class load and staff the center with experienced, full-time teachers. The student teacher option provides the added benefit of necessitating a collaboration with a college or university. Whether the college English Department, Education Department, or writing center is involved, teachers in the secondary schools receive input from the other institution while participating in the training of preservice teachers who need the experience of working with individual students and their writing. Writing centers are becoming more common in high schools, not only giving secondary students the extra help in writing they need, but creating a network that is beneficial on a number of levels. (AEW)

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Secondary Writing Centers: Benefits of College and Secondary Collaboration

Ellen H. Brinkley

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SECONDARY WRITING CENTERS: BENEFITS OF

COLLEGE AND SECONDARY COLLABORATION

Although we haven't heard a lot about it yet, the news is beginning to spread. The fact is that writing centers are springing up in high schools all over the country. As secondary teachers embrace the writing process, they are reaching out for more. As they attend in-service programs and summer institutes, they compare notes with teachers from other schools. They hear about the value of individual conferences in the teaching of writing and how writing centers, or labs, can make individuals conferencing possible.

College professors and writing center directors are reaching out too--training secondary teachers in summer programs--and while doing so, they themselves are learning about their world, their everyday frustrations and joys.

Based on experience teaching at both college and secondary levels, I want to consider (1) how college experience with writing centers has influenced the high schools, (2) what the problems and promise of secondary writing centers are, and (3) how colleges involved with teacher preparation might work cooperatively with nearby schools to the mutual benefit of both.

Clearly, high school writing centers exist because of the success of college writing centers. Fortunately, high schools have benefited from observing both the successes and the mistakes of college models. They learned, for instance, that there were a variety of college models to choose from. In fact, sometimes it seemed college writing centers were used to teach almost anything and everything. Those who designed secondary centers discovered, then, that they had choices to make as to what model would work best. They also learned that college

centers struggled for funding and for recognition and sometimes even struggled with their relationships with other parts of the institution. Secondary teachers faced similar struggles as they set up writing centers.

They learned another crucially important lesson from the painful experiences of many college labs that were initially set up as remediation centers. The motives of college writing center directors had been admirable, of course, but secondary teachers decided that high school students, like their college counterparts, might stay away in droves if the center focused solely on remediation.

On the positive side, surely the most important lesson learned from college writing centers is that the conference method is the best, most effective way to teach writing. Secondary teachers caught the enthusiasm of Donald Murray and Donald Graves, who so persuasively advocated teaching writing one-to-one. They understood that students learn more when their writing gets individual attention focusing on particular strengths and weaknesses, and those in secondary schools wanted the opportunity to give that individual attention.

Even as secondary teachers learned from the college successes and failures, they also knew that the public high school has its own set of unique, additional challenges to meet and obstacles to overcome. For example, most high schools have a tight daily schedule which locks students into a routine that seldom allows them to "drop in" to a writing center. When students have a six- or seven-period day, sometimes with no study halls, they wondered whether one-to-one help in a writing center was even a remote possibility.

Not only do the students have rigid schedules, but teachers do as

well. They don't have the luxury of office hours at intervals throughout the day or classes staggered on alternating days with time in between to see students individually. Often public school teachers have six classes a day with just one fifty-minute period for preparation and conferences. Student load? Sometimes thirty plus per class. Paper load? If we believe that students learn to write by writing, consider as many as 180 students five days a week, all busy writing papers for their teachers to read! What teacher faced with such a daily grind could spare attention to be lavished in a writing center on one student at a time? (I do believe, because of the heavy load and schedule, a strong case can be made that high schools need writing centers even more than the universities.)

What a bleak picture! Fortunately, many of the obstacles can be overcome and the challenges met.

At Madeira High School in Cincinnati we combined our request for a writing center with a request for a reduced class load and class size. Amazingly enough, our administrators listened! They said to us, teach four classes a day and use two periods a day to be available to give "writing assistance" in a writing center. In addition, they said, we'll give you an average class size of twenty. And, yes, this meant hiring additional English teachers.

The center at Madeira, and those at other high schools I am most familiar with, grew from the teachers persuading administrators of their need. What is more, word of mouth among teachers, I believe, has played an important part in the development of new secondary centers. Let me cite a personal example. A couple of years ago during an inservice program

I did for a high school English Department, I mentioned Madeira's Writing Assistance Program and described it briefly. One of the teachers commented that an administrator should be there to hear what I was saying. An hour or so later, as we were finishing up, the superintendent walked in and sat down. At that point the teachers looked at him and looked at me and said, very aggressively, "Now, tell him what you told us!" And, yes, a year later they did begin a writing center. I believe there are many such stories and that many high school centers have been created because the "word" is spreading. (As an aside, I sometimes wonder if writing project people are aware of the political dimensions of their summer programs. Bringing together teachers from a variety of districts provides a forum for the exchange of information and ideas that prompts teachers to go back to their own districts and ask for what they've heard other teachers describe.)

Interestingly enough, I'm discovering that some secondary centers appear to be mandated by administrators and school boards. One high school teacher in Akron, Ohio, writes, "At an inservice meeting our principal announced to the English Department that a writing center would be established" (Baltrinic, 1987). You might wonder what could motivate administrators to seek such a program that surely will end up costing them money. Actually, the sentence which precedes the one I just quoted reads, "With competency tests in composition imminent, the Akron Board of Education directed each high school in our system to offer intervention programs to help students improve their composition skills." It will indeed be interesting to trace the impact that testing might have on

the development of secondary centers.

In the Akron case, the teachers were trained in a summer program offered at a nearby college after learning that a center would be established. Whether the training comes before or after the idea of a secondary center is conceived, writing center directors and college faculty do have much to offer the schools. They know well how to intervene into students' writing processes without taking possession of the students' writing and how to empower student writers by nudging them to find their best ideas and to organize and express them effectively. Acting as consultants, then, they can offer secondary teachers instruction on teaching writing one-to-one and on how to design and implement a writing center.

For secondary schools wanting to establish a writing center, staffing can be the single most significant and expensive factor. To school administrators, who honestly believe that six classes a day is a reasonable load, the idea of using teachers to staff a writing center can be almost impossible to sell.

Some schools, even secondary schools, do use peer tutors. And I respect their choice. As Kenneth Bruffee has shown us, peer tutors can be very effective, if trained carefully to serve as nonthreatening reader-responders. For many schools peer tutors seem the only feasible way to staff a center.

My personal bias is to provide, as in Madeira's case, a center staffed by full-time teachers who are professionally trained and have years of experience. I say this because for myself--after having had training, having done research, having trained others, having years of experience working individually with students' writing--still there are occasions when I'm uncertain how to respond to a student and when I have

to draw on all my resources to be genuinely helpful. I believe, then, that students benefit most from highly trained staff.

Of course, many school districts aren't willing or able to afford using teachers to staff their writing center. There exists, however, a third option for staff which offers some of the advantages of both of the first two, that is, to use preservice teachers at least as supplementary writing center staff. Student teachers, for instance, could be scheduled to spend one period a day working in a writing center. This kind of plan might even make secondary centers possible where they aren't possible otherwise, because, as with peer tutors, such a program makes available staff that won't cost the high schools money.

I realize that student teachers are placed in the schools for a limited time and that depending heavily on student teachers might leave several weeks out of the year when the center would be minimally staffed. Even so, I would choose to use them in a center for whatever time they are available. Teachers in the building might even be able to schedule major writing projects, such as research papers, to coincide with the weeks that the tutors are available.

Will the schools reap all the benefits of such an arrangement? Not at all. As writing centers become more common in the high schools, they offer an ideal setting for the experience preservice teachers need, the experience of working with individual students and their writing. In fact, I believe that we should recommend, or even require, that preservice teachers understand the work of writing centers and actually work--briefly at least--in either a college or secondary center.

To prepare for their lab experience, college writing center directors

could be involved in teaching preservice teachers, who might be offered a course in the lab itself. Such training might also be offered in the English Department by those who already teach writing methods courses.

William Smith has outlined the benefits of such training. He points out that the writing lab should "provide the intern a great number of relatively short, but concentrated teaching experiences. Such discrete sessions allow an intern to practice and thus develop abilities and skills without having to worry about creating an extended set of course materials or fitting into someone else's long-range planning" (Smith, 1984). He reports that such experience provides work with a variety of students and writing problems, skill in diagnosing, and a "safe yet demanding environment before they [are] thrust into a classroom."

I would go further and suggest that all preservice teachers in English and Language Arts, even at the elementary level, need to work with students individually. This semester I have worked with an elementary teacher who heads the Young Authors program in her school. I taught my students, who are preservice elementary teachers, how to do individual conferences, and she scheduled my students to meet with her students individually to discuss the rough drafts of their books for the Young Authors program. My students met the same children two weeks later to discuss revisions and editing. It was clear from my students' comments in subsequent class sessions that they gained a great deal of insight and confidence from this experience which gave them the chance to work with real children and their writing.

There are other collaborative possibilities involving the secondary writing center which could provide mutual benefit. Students taking

writing methods courses might have a practicum assignment which could include a limited assignment as a writing center tutor. Universities with large numbers of teaching assistants might work out an arrangment whereby TA's could work as tutors. Doctoral students in both Education and English could find fertile ground for research in the high school lab. For instance, education students might in a lab study different questioning techniques. English students studying composition theory might study revision strategies used by a variety of students. Eventually, of course, the secondary schools would also benefit from knowing the results of the research conducted in their labs.

Secondary writing centers face severe problems in becoming a reality, but once established, I believe they hold great promise. Furthermore, I believe that we will see more of them appearing and that the professional journals will soon describe a variety of approaches and programs. If this occurs, it will mean all sorts of good things are happening: it will mean that secondary students are doing a lot of writing, and it will mean that more and more secondary teachers and administrators recognize the value of teaching writing as a process and the value of individual conferences.

I believe that all concerned--high school students and faculty, university students and faculty, and leaders of university writing centers--will be better served if the schools and universities are able to work cooperatively. Whether the college English Department, the Education Department, or the Writing Center is involved, teachers in the secondary schools need to become informed about better ways to teach writing. Secondary schools need to offer the kind of help a writing center can

provide. Preservice teachers from the universities need to work individually with secondary students and their writing. I encourage everyone involved to seek ways to work together for the benefit of all.

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Approximately 2100 words